

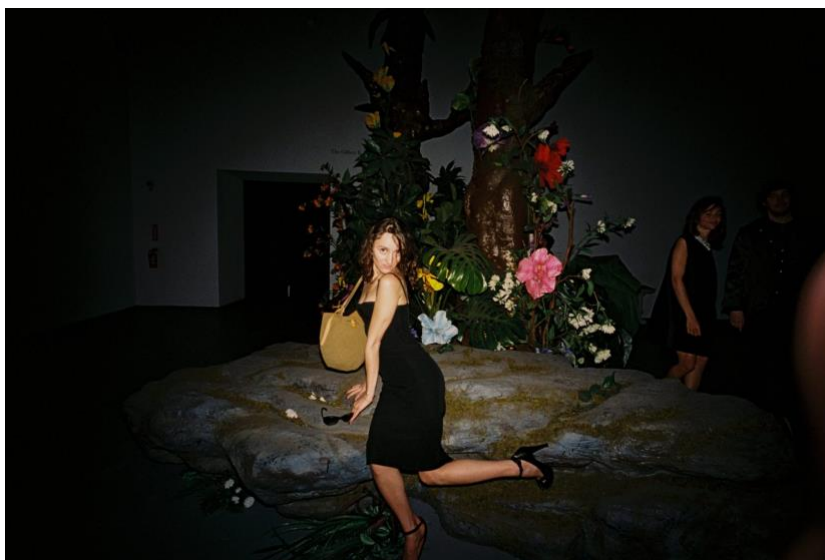
Purple
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“MOCA Gala 2026” at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles

Bianca Vazquez



Conceived by artist Piero Golia in collaboration with editor Pietro Scalia and food artist Laila Gohar, the evening honored Paul McCarthy and Kara Walker through a live edit of reality. Six hundred guests moved through orchestras, speeches, bird baths overflowing with figs and mozzarella, and an invisible choreography that turned the museum into both stage and public square.

Set within MOCA's Little Tokyo space, the gala reflected the museum's artist-founded legacy and the artists profound influence on art, history, power, and representation.

The MOCA Gala Symphony Orchestra performed an original composition for six hundred guests gathered inside MOCA's Geffen Contemporary. All eyes were fixed on the orchestra.

Then the music stopped.

Six hundred people turned around.

The movement was so seamless it barely registered in real time. Only later, reviewing my photographs, did I realize I had captured the sequence: an orchestra facing one direction, a crowd in motion, and then a room completely reoriented. What appeared to be a logistical adjustment revealed itself as something closer to a cinematic cut.

Not on screen, but in space.

Conceived by artist Piero Golia in collaboration with editor Pietro Scalia, food artist Laila Gohar, and a sprawling cast of collaborators, including a fleet of attendants all named George, the evening unfolded less like a fundraiser than a live edit of reality. Guests drifted between orchestras and speeches, bird baths overflowing with figs and mozzarella, museum patrons and picketing workers, all while moving through an invisible choreography that felt at once spontaneous and meticulously composed.

For Golia, the gala became an opportunity to work with a native language of Los Angeles: the cut. Not merely the cinematic cut, but the social cut: the subtle redirection of attention, movement, and desire. If Paris was built around plazas and monuments, Los Angeles was built around editing. For a few hours, MOCA became both stage and public square.

By night's end, a seven-foot cake would quietly become five. But that was only one of many invisible edits.

I. THE CUT

PURPLE: Looking through my photographs afterward, I realized I had captured something I didn't fully understand in the moment. There are three frames that read like a film sequence. In the first, the orchestra faces the audience. In the second, the room begins to shift. In the third, hundreds of people have completely reoriented themselves. The audience is suddenly looking somewhere else. It felt less like crowd management and more like a cinematic cut. How did that moment come together?

PIERO GOLIA: [in a heavy Italian accent] When we were planning the evening, I kept thinking about creating a dynamic experience. In film, you do it in post, digitally. You have your timeline. You move

things around. You shorten something. You extend something. You move the soundtrack. You decide where things begin and end. Here, instead, you do it to real life. That's why I asked Pietro to help. At the beginning he thought I was crazy. He kept asking me, "Where is the footage?" And I told him, "There is no footage. We have reality."

PURPLE: What fascinated me was the decision to bring Pietro into the process. The idea of applying cinematic editing to reality, to a room, a crowd, and an evening unfolding in real time, completely changed the way I understood the gala.

GOLIA: If you think about it, it's like theater. It's like a story continuously developing. The orchestra comes in through the same line as the guests. Everybody arrives together. Then the music starts moving through the room. First a few people hear it. Then more people hear it. Then the room slowly begins to rotate. The lights go down. Galloway appears.

PURPLE: Yet nothing felt forced.

GOLIA: If you want to give a real experience, you should never force people. Everybody kept telling me, "You have to stay on time." And I kept saying, "There is no time. There are people." To move six hundred people from one room to another without somebody holding an iPad and telling them where to go, that's the challenge. The joke was always: are people going to follow the schedule, or are they going to follow Galloway? And they followed Galloway.

II. THE MISSING PLAZA

PURPLE: If the gala was about how to move people seamlessly through space, I'm curious how you think about the city itself as a space to be shaped.

GOLIA: Guy Debord said that cities are like interactive canvases. I was in Paris once, smoking in front of my hotel, because you can't smoke in your room anymore. I looked up and

there was Joan of Arc, made of gold, standing in the middle of a plaza, looking at me. And I realized statues and monuments are elements to help us navigate the city, directly or indirectly effecting emotions and behaviors. Los Angeles was built differently. The fanciest Japanese restaurant is on the second floor of a mini-mall. The city was never really designed as a place for people to gather. You arrive by car. You leave by car. Everything is separated. In a way, LA was built to separate people. The old Roman idea was divide and rule. Different neighborhoods. Different communities. Different worlds.

PURPLE: You arrived in Los Angeles in 2002. How has it changed for you?

GOLIA: I believe LA historically had reacted with the lack of public space with an intense private life. When I first came to Los Angeles, there was magic. You could see a party, stop your car, walk in, and suddenly find yourself talking to artists, musicians, filmmakers, people you had never met before. There were no lists. There were no invitations. People were just together. I don't think that exists anymore. COVID was the finale. Everything became transactional. Everything became just scripted events. There is less real life. But I still hope we can go back to spontaneity and real life.

PURPLE: Listening to you, it sounds like you were trying to recover something that has disappeared from Los Angeles.

GOLIA: MOCA was built by artists for artists. Not as a box to store expensive things, but as a home for the magic and crazy. What interested me was that suddenly you have six hundred people in one room. What do you do with that opportunity? What I wanted to do Saturday was bring some of that spirit back. To show that if you love artists, artists will do things for you that they will not do for somebody else. That's what I wanted to remind people of what a museum can be. The joke of the whole thing was that there were actually two galas happening at the same time. There was the institutional gala. You arrive, you take the cheesy picture, you see the sponsors, you follow the expected sequence of events. But inside that, I was trying to stage my own gala. There is this whole institutional framework that I completely ignore, think about the announcements overlapping Galloway's speech or the existing walls crossing path with Paul's trees. If you look at the tree positioning that Edwin (Chan) did, those trees are placed as if the museum's physical walls do not even exist.

III. GEORGE

PURPLE: At a certain point I realized that every person in white uniforms was named George.

Who was George?

GOLIA: While I was searching on the internet on the perfect character who could intrude the service, I come to find this amazing picture of this perfect waiter in white uniform, on his jacket was embroidered "George". Now I realized that probably George was the name of the restaurant, not of the guy, but George become the official name, so they are all George men or women, young or old, tall or short. All there to welcome you in the same way, "Hi, my name is George, and I'm going to take care of you."

PURPLE: It took me a while to realize something unusual was happening. First there was the orchestra moving through the crowd carrying instrument cases and champagne flutes. Then there were the bird baths overflowing with figs and giant mozzarella. Then George. Nothing announced itself as performance, yet everything felt slightly off. I even asked one of the Georges where your work was. Little did I realize I was speaking to it.

GOLIA: It's the theater who reveals itself. Not because somebody tells you. While you are looking at Galloway, the orchestra is already moving into the dining room. The story is already continuing somewhere else.

PURPLE: At one point Galloway started throwing pages of his speech onto the floor.

GOLIA: [Laughs] Even I kept telling him, "Galloway, you have to learn the speech." The day of, he asked me for a teleprompter. I printed the speech in giant letters and told him, "When you're done with a page, throw it away." He actually did it. The first time people laughed. The second time he looked at the audience and even said, "Piero told me to do that." And suddenly everybody understood we are playing theater.

IV. THE 7-FOOT CAKE

PURPLE: There were collectors, patrons, protestors outside, and then these remarkably emotional speeches from Kara Walker and Paul McCarthy. Kara, in particular, seemed to challenge the institution itself, calling on MOCA to stand behind artists willing to confront historical amnesia, complacency, and the political realities of the moment. It felt less like an acceptance speech and more of a reminder of what art is supposed to do.

GOLIA: Kara's whole speech was just so powerful. She was standing like a monument. Tall, the sculptural dress, the royal posture. Wow. And Paul was like a star. I never saw him in a blazer. Indeed he wore one and left the room in tears with his speech.

PURPLE: What struck me was that neither of them seemed interested in simply celebrating themselves. Both speeches felt like they were asking something of the institution. Which is maybe why the protest outside felt connected from what was happening inside.

GOLIA: I grew up on the far left. I believe protest is the highest form of resistance. Those workers had every right to be there. They are part of the institution. And obviously more than everybody the artists have the right to speak their minds.

PURPLE: You said something that stayed with me: that a museum is not a country club.

GOLIA: A museum is not a luxury environment for the elite who can afford it. It's a necessity. A museum exists for the people who will never be able to buy art. Art belongs to everybody. That's why museums exist.

PURPLE: The title of this interview might have to be Seven-Foot Cake.

GOLIA: You know what's funny? When Galloway was giving the final speech, somebody called me from the back and told me, "The cake has fallen." And I said, "Fuck you man, this is not a joke." But it wasn't a joke. I walked backstage and the cake had collapsed. It was seven feet tall. We only had one cake. There was no replacement. And there was nothing to scream about because there was no solution.

PURPLE: What did you do?

GOLIA: You keep going. I could still hear Galloway speaking, so I knew exactly how much time remained. We pushed everything we could back into place. The front looked beautiful. The back was completely destroyed. We saved five feet. We didn't save seven. Nobody noticed.

PURPLE: I didn't notice.

GOLIA: That's why I say art is like magic. People think the magic is the object. The magic is not the object. The magic is the music, the timing, the perspective, the promenade, the sequence of events. The cake is only one ingredient. Everything goes wrong. Always. The spotlight doesn't arrive. The tablecloths don't arrive. The napkins are wrong. The cake falls. Something always happens.

PURPLE: It's funny because I keep coming back to the cake, but not because it fell. I don't even like cake. And I loved that cake. I ate the cake.

GOLIA: Maybe is because I come from a generation in Italy where even if you were poor, somebody brought pastries to Sunday lunch. You always gave people something special. The cake is not important because it's cake. The cake is important because it makes people feel that today is special.

Photos and Text by Bianca Vazquez